

## The European Construction Social Partners: Gender Equality in Theory and Practice

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## **The European Construction Social Partners: Gender Equality in Theory and Practice**

**ABSTRACT** ■ This article explores the social partners' role in the gender equality agenda in construction at skilled operative level. It draws on a survey of the European construction social partners that investigated the presence of women in skilled trades and the policies, collective agreements and practices that play a role in women's integration. The responses indicate that the construction industry still displays inertia and conservatism, and that the social partners corroborate rather than counter this. They express a 'discourse' of gender equality, but this does not automatically lead to equal opportunity policies or programmes. The social partners have the platform to make inroads and to change the industry from within, but need further encouragement to put this on their agenda.

### **Introduction**

There are few sectors in Europe where gender segregation in the labour market is more evident than the construction industry, particularly at the skilled operative level. In this article, we explore the position of the social partners towards the gender equality agenda, especially regarding skilled trades such as carpenters, painters and bricklayers. We ask whether the social partners in construction advance the inclusion of women, in line with the European employment and equality agenda, or whether they are guilty of preserving women's present marginalization.

The article draws on a survey of the social partners in construction in both western and eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> This investigated the presence of women in skilled trades in each country and the existence of policies, collective agreements, or practices that play a role in their integration. The findings show that there are few exceptions to the dominant picture of low female representation in construction, little changed over the past

10 years. The social partners have had little impact on increasing the representation of women in the industry overall and there appear to be few internal or external forces driving them to change the situation.

EU social and employment policies have a long-standing focus on gender inequalities in Europe, embracing the principles of equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming. Key objectives are to reduce both the gender pay gap and sectoral as well as occupational gender segregation, which are seen as creating 'rigidity in the labour market, reducing the market's ability to respond to change' (EC, 2001). However, research shows that the impact of this agenda in national member states remains uneven, and that there is a tension between the targets of increasing participation and reducing segregation (Gonäs, 2004; Rubery et al., 2003).

The social partners, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the peak private-sector employers' organization (UNICE) and the peak public-sector organization (CEEP) play a very important role in regulating European employment and equality issues (Léonard, 2001). The first two agreements reached under the Maastricht procedures and subsequently adopted as directives, on parental leave (1995) and part-time work (1997), had clear gender equality implications. EU policy puts considerable stress on the potential of collective agreements to address labour market inequalities: 'if collective bargaining lacks a gender perspective, it is very likely that agreements will institutionalise discriminatory practice, entrench rather than challenge gender segregation of work, and operate on a male norm of employment, to the obvious disadvantage of women' (EIRO, 2000). Yet are the social partners really in the forefront in ensuring the implementation of this agenda at European and national levels?

Much research has addressed the role of trade unions on gender issues (for instance, Cockburn, 1991; Dickens, 2000; Kirton and Greene, 2002; Wajcman, 2000). Colgan and Ledwith (2002) provide an international overview of unions and the promotion and participation of women, revealing a wide range of different agendas across the globe. Research on women's groups or committees in unions confirms their role as catalysts for change, contributing to an environment where 'women can develop strengths and advance their concerns' (Foley, 2003; Parker, 2003). Studies by Munro (2001) and McBride (2001) in the UK indicate that women's equality and employment issues have become part of the central agenda of unions such as Unison, which operate in areas of high female employment. The actions of trade unions to promote the participation of women and the incorporation of gender equality issues can, however, be summarized as more reactive than proactive.

In this article, we explore the actions of the social partners in a sector in which women's employment and therefore female representation is minimal. The European social partners may have taken part in setting the

European equality agenda of increased female participation in the workplace and reduction of gender segregation, but how far has this agenda been embraced and implemented by the national social partners in construction? As this is a very important and, at the same time, highly male-dominated sector, it is particularly critical to the European aim of reducing gender segregation. The eastern European social partners have not been fully part of this European employment agenda, but the comparison with their western European partners is illuminating, as the pattern of employment of women is very different (Pollert, 1999).

Women's participation in construction in eastern Europe remains high despite the weakness of the social partners, and this indicates the problem we face in establishing how far the social partners themselves exert an impact on the gender division of labour (Clarke et al., 2003). Recent research has shown that the structures and mechanisms of gender exclusion differ across Europe, depending on the productive system in place (EC Consortium, 2003). In the highly regulated, skilled, and industrialized construction industries of northern Europe, in particular Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, entry depends very much on formal qualifications and hence on the training system (Bosch and Philips, 2002; Clarke and Wall, 2000). In the more craft-based and unregulated industries of southern Europe and even Britain, in contrast, where skills are often acquired on the job, employment is much more casual and the training system has far less importance as a 'gatekeeper' to entry. Also, in terms of employment and the wage system (factors upon which social partners can have a decisive impact), the prevalence of labour-only subcontracting, casual employment, and piecework appear to have far more exclusionary gender implications than firm-based systems of stable employment and time-based, graded wage systems (Byrne et al., 2005). Thus each country will have a different combination of factors which influence gender exclusion. In the Netherlands, for instance, this has been attributed to recruitment from the countryside and lack of political will on the part of the social partners and the training institutions (EC Consortium, 2003; Westerhuis, 2004).

National institutions do not excuse the social partners from their role in perpetuating and even reinforcing gender exclusion in construction. There is ample evidence that they have played a critical role in enforcing the gender division of labour, for example, in postwar Britain, when the trade unions colluded with the employers and the state in excluding women from skilled work (Boston, 1980; Clarke and Wall, 2004). In Germany at the same time, women were also increasingly and systematically excluded from construction in the Western zones, in contrast to the East (Janssen, 2004).

Our intention here is not only to chart the situation, but to identify where the construction social partners have taken initiatives to be more

gender inclusive and why in certain places actions appear to be successful.

## European Level: Gender Equality and Social Partners in Construction

The construction sector plays a significant part in the European economy: in 2002, it accounted directly for 8 percent of employment (more than 12.7 million persons) and indirectly for up to 20 percent (EC, 2002a). In many EU countries, including Britain and Italy, severe skill and labour shortages are reported, with the additional immigrant (as opposed to female) workforce insufficient to cover increased demand.

How many women work in construction? The majority of women working in the western European construction sectors undertake administrative, technical and professional work. European Labour Force Survey statistics do not allow us to distinguish between occupations: the figures combine manual and administrative and professional occupations. Nevertheless, even in aggregate terms women are severely underrepresented in each western European country (there is no comparable eastern European information). Three blocks can be distinguished: Germany and Switzerland have the highest female employment in their national construction sectors (13 and 12 percent, respectively); the Mediterranean block of Spain, Portugal and Greece (5, 4, and 2 percent, respectively) has the lowest representation of women; while Scandinavia (Sweden at 7 percent, Norway and Denmark at 8 percent and Finland at 9 percent) together with the Netherlands and Belgium (8 and 7 percent, respectively) take a middle position, around the EU average of 9 percent (EC, 2002a). Data on women in manual trades are scarce to non-existent, but the available information suggests that in most countries these represent less than 1 percent of the workforce at skilled operative level (Byrne et al., 2005).

After commerce, construction is the largest sector where a sectoral social dialogue exists at European level and is covered by EU protocols (EC, 2002b). Most of the national employers' federations are affiliated to the European Construction Industry Federation (Fédération de l'industrie européenne de la construction or FIEC), which, with a membership of 32 federations in 25 countries, is more representative than its main alternative, the European Builders' Confederation. The trade unions are part of the European Federation of Building and Wood Workers (EFBWW) and the Nordic Federation of Building and Wood Workers (NBTF), the European arms of the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW), which (as their titles indicate) cover both the construction and woodworking industries. With some

exceptions, in particular Greece, the EFBWW and NBTf represent all the building trade unions in EU member states that have collective bargaining power.

Collective bargaining has survived in the construction industry in most European countries (Schnepf et al., 1997). At European level, construction has one of 26 sectoral social dialogue committees bringing together European-level representatives of trade unions and employers for discussions on employment, competitiveness, and social issues (EC, 2002b). Since 1999 this has taken place in a more formal way through the committee for the construction sector, on which the FIEC and EFBWW are representatives. The main themes discussed are health and safety, the image of the sector, life-long learning, social dumping, posted workers and the consequences of EU enlargement (EC, 2003).

In 2000, a joint declaration on employment was signed, but there is no evidence of consideration of workforce diversity, gender issues, or equal opportunities. In contrast, other sectoral committees have addressed such issues: codes of conduct on fundamental rights and equal opportunities have been signed in leather and tanning, footwear and hairdressing, while good practice guides have been adopted in textiles, clothing and postal services, and the telecommunications industry has established a diversity working party covering subjects such as equal opportunities and disabled and migrant workers.

Neither the FIEC nor EFBWW has women's or equal opportunities committees or working groups. The FIEC subcommittee on vocational training does, however, consider that the issues relating to encouraging young people into the industry are very similar to those that would attract women. At a subcommittee meeting in 2001, discussions of common concern emerged on the following issues: recruiting and retaining young people in the sector, training trainers, the equivalence of diplomas, worker mobility, the use of new technology in the field of vocational training and the recruitment of women (FIEC, 2002). On the union side, only the IFBWW has a stated commitment to women's rights: one of the nine priorities of its strategic plan for 2001–05 is to 'promote and support women', and in October 2002, its conference on Europe for the first time elected a European Women's Committee (IFBWW, 2003).

The issues of the integration of women and gender equality do not therefore appear to have a place on the agenda of social dialogue at European level, although they might be addressed on the margins when discussing other matters. If not at European level, perhaps there is a debate at national social partner level? As no comparative information on this was available, a survey of the European social partners in construction (including in eastern Europe) was undertaken by the authors.

## National Level: Gender Equality and Social Partners in Construction

There is at national level across Europe a diversity of unions representing the interests of building workers. In Germany, building workers are represented by a single union, IG BAU; in other countries, the trade unions are split along occupational lines, as in the UK and Denmark, or along political or religious lines (or both), as in Switzerland, France, and Italy (Schnepf et al., 1997). Trade union density varies from 85–90 percent in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Belgium to 60 percent in Italy, 40 percent in Germany, 21 percent in the UK (14 percent in the private sector), and 10 percent in Spain (Byrne and Van de Meer, 2002). Membership levels in some countries do not necessarily reflect the representativeness of the unions or coverage of collective agreements, particularly when the principle of *erga omnes* applies (as in France and Germany), extending coverage of collective agreements to all employees.

Associations at national level represent the construction employers' interests in diverse ways. In many countries, they are divided by firm size or area of construction activity; for instance, in France and Germany separate associations represent smaller craft firms. In some countries, such as the UK, one national confederation (the Construction Confederation) represents the interests of the different federations at national and European level. A relatively high level of employer representativeness is found across western Europe, though not everywhere (for instance, coverage is lower in Spain and to a lesser extent the Netherlands). The level of employer organization is in many countries similar to that of unionization, giving a strong basis for negotiation. However, it is notable that in Spain employers have an even lower level of organization (5 percent) than the unions, while the reverse is true in the UK, with a rate of more than 80 percent (UCL, 2001). In the eastern European countries, employer organization is especially weak or even non-existent, more so than membership of the company-based unions (Clarke et al., 2003).

In order to investigate the extent to which women are represented in skilled trades and equality issues figure on the social partners' agenda, we conducted a survey in 2003. A questionnaire was sent to employer and trade union organizations covering such topics as the numbers and occupations of women workers in the member firms or union (particularly in the skilled trades); women's involvement in the union or employers' organization; the inclusion of work–life balance issues in collective agreements (such as maternity pay or hours); the obstacles to women's access to the sector; and recommendations to overcome these.

Trade union and employer organizations were contacted by different routes. For trade unions, a postal questionnaire was sent to 50 EFBWW



members and 25 eastern European affiliates in one of six languages as appropriate. In total, after follow-up contact, 21 trade unions completed the questionnaire. All nine of the Scandinavian trade unions contacted completed the questionnaire; the other responses came from Spain and the UK (two each) and one each from France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland in the west, and Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Russia, and Serbia in the east.

The survey of employers' organizations took place in collaboration with FIEC, which distributed the questionnaire to the 21 members of its Vocational Training Working Group (SOC-1). Some 12 responses were received: from Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Norway, Sweden, and the UK, and from the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Significant omissions included the Union of Construction and Allied Technical Trades (UCATT), the union with the largest share of construction workers in the UK, and the French construction unions. On the positive side, replies from all the Scandinavian social partners were especially valuable, enabling us to examine, for example, whether the increase in the number of women painters in Denmark was part of a larger regional trend. The low response rate, particularly from the trade unions, and the lack of response from important unions in the larger EU countries despite repeated follow-ups, while influencing our data also reflect a lack of concern with the subject.

## **Skilled Women Workers in Construction**

The data from both the employer and trade union organizations confirm very low numbers of women working in the sector (and therefore as members), generally reported to be less than 10 percent. This is consistent with overall figures of 8.6 percent for female employment in the sector in Europe (EC, 2002a). On the employers' side, only the French Building Federation presented data on operatives, with the number of women craft-workers put at 1.1 percent. More trade-specific information was given by the unions. Table 1 gives an overview for each of the unions, including: the occupations it covers (which varies greatly); the proportion of women members (of the construction part of the union only); their occupations; the percentage of the construction labour force unionized; and the total union membership in construction. In countries where union membership is high, we can assume that most, if not all, women are included in the information provided, especially for the manual trades.

The manual occupations covered by the construction unions differ. In Finland and Germany, cleaners are included in the construction union



TABLE 1. Women Construction Union Membership in Western and Eastern Europe

| Country | Name of union                              | Main construction occupations represented | Union members in the construction industry | Construction labour force unionized (%) | Women union members in construction (%) | Construction occupations of women members                              |
|---------|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| Denmark | SiD  | Bricklayers and concreters                | 44,000                                     | 80–85                                   | >1                                      | Bricklayers  |
|         | Dansk EL-Forbund (EL-F)                    | Electricians                              | 5,000                                      | 90                                      | 5                                       | Electricians   |
|         | Blik og Rørarbejderforbundet               | Plumbers/heating                          | n/a  | 84                                      | >1                                      | Plumbers/heating   |
|         | Malerforbundet i Danmark                   | Painters                                  | 9,917                                      | 90                                      | 30 (3,000)                              | Painters   |
|         | Forbundet Træ-Industri-Byg i Danmark (TIB) | Carpenters and joiners                    | 30,700                                     | 90                                      | 1 (300)                                 | Carpenters and joiners   |
| Germany | IG-Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt                      | General construction                      | 236,000                                    | 30                                      | 14.8                                    | All trades, including cleaners, gardeners, architects, engineers, etc. |
| Sweden  | Byggnads                                   | General construction                      | 100,000                                    | 85                                      | 0.8 (800)                               | Cleaners, etc.   |
| Norway  | Fellesforbundet                            | General construction                      | 28,500                                     | 50                                      | 4.2 (1,200)                             | –  |
| Finland | Finnish Electrical                         | Electricians                              | 10,687                                     | 50                                      | 0.9 (97)                                | Electricians   |
|         | Workers' Union                             | General construction                      | 80,793                                     | 78                                      | 3 (+ 1,500 retired members)             | Mainly painters  |

TABLE 1. Continued

| Country     | Name of union                        | Main construction occupations represented | Union members in the construction industry | Construction labour force unionized (%)  | Women union members in construction (%) | Construction occupations of women members           |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|---|---|
| Netherlands | FNV-Bouw                             | General/all trades                        | 160,000                                    | 50                                       | 10 (410)                                | 10% includes support jobs, but not finishing trades |
| Britain     | AMICUS-MSF                           | Heating and ventilating                   | 3,900                                      | 40 (heating and ventilating)             | 3 (116)                                 | –   |
|             | Transport and General Workers' Union | General/all trades                        | 21,255                                     | 21 (public sector 75; private sector 14) | 1.5 (329)                               | Construction trades and other occupations           |
| Spain       | ELA                                  | General construction                      | 3,700                                      | 15                                       | 8.1 (300)                               | Mainly administration                               |
|             | MCA-UGT                              | General construction                      | 20,000                                     | 5  | 10 (2,000)                              | Mainly administration                               |
| Italy       | FILCA-CISL                           | General construction and wood industries  | 209,730                                    | 40                                       | construction 1; wood industries 30      | Mainly administration                               |
| Switzerland | Gewerkschaft Bau und Industrie (GBI) | General construction                      | 57,000                                     | Building 80; ancillary 50                | 2.1 (1,211)                             | Building (662 women) and finishing trades (535)     |

TABLE 1. Continued

| Country        | Name of union  | Main construction occupations represented   | Union members in the construction industry | Construction labour force unionized (%)  | Women union members in construction (%) | Construction occupations of women members   |
|----------------|--|---|--|--|---|---|
| Russia         | Construction and Building Materials Workers' Union                         | All construction-related occupations: architecture, design, building materials manufacture and construction | c. 1 million                               | Over 50 (25 in other unions and 50 irregular migrant workers and private sector) | 3                                       | Architects, designers and managers; machine operators; crane drivers, painters, plasterers. |
| Bulgaria       | Federation of Construction Industry and Water Supply (PODKREPA)            | All trades  | 4,300                                      | +/- 25   | 28                                      | More women in administration  |
| Czech Republic | Building Workers' Union of the Czech Republic                              | Building and building materials   | 25,758                                     | 40.8   | 25 (6,620)                              | Management, administration, production workers, trainers                                    |
| Serbia         | Civil engineering and construction materials industry union (NEZAVISINOST) | Civil engineering, building materials, wood industry  | 2,500                                      | 20   | 20                                      |   |

Source: own survey, 2003.

and in Sweden, they represent the majority of women members. Although women are to be found in the unions in increasing numbers, the vast majority work not as tradeswomen, but in administrative and increasingly in technical and professional occupations, with architecture and engineering specifically mentioned. Increases in female membership were reported by the Danish painting union, Malerforbundet i Danmark (an increase of 800), the Dutch building union, FNV-Bouw (an increase of 10 percent, mostly in support jobs), the Spanish construction union, ELA, and the Italian general construction and wood industry union, FILCA-CISL. The German union, IG BAU, which experienced a fall in overall membership levels because of the crisis in the sector, is campaigning to recruit more women cleaners and for improvement in their working and employment conditions. Wages and conditions in cleaning are generally considered poor, and currently only 6.4 percent of the nearly 400,000 employees in the area are union members (EIRO, 2001). However, women constitute as much as 15 percent of the membership of IG BAU, half of these in cleaning, 14 percent in gardening and agriculture and 11 percent in professional and technical occupations, including architecture and engineering (IG BAU, 2004).

The Nordic countries present some interesting exceptions to the general picture of very few women (around 1 percent) in manual trades in the old EU countries. A significant proportion of painters are women in Denmark (33 percent) and Finland (10 percent). In Denmark, the numbers of female and male painting apprentices are now equal (Pedersen, 2004). This 'breakthrough' is attributable to a number of specific factors. Health and safety concerns in the 1970s led to a labour shortage in the trade, after which employers looked to women as potential recruits (Clarke et al., 1999). The move to a vocational college-based training system, lessening the dependence on employers, has also played a role in consolidating women's presence in the trade. But even where women have made significant gains, there remain barriers. The Danish Painters Employers' Federation, though noting that some women own small firms and that sole traders might not be members, reports that only 2–3 percent of its 1500 member firms are owned by women. The Danish electricians' union, Dansk El-Forbund, also reports increasing numbers of women electricians (5 percent of members), and cites the reason for this as the decrease in the physical demands of the work.

In the UK, against a background of almost total exclusion, small pockets of women are to be found working for public-sector employers in local authority building departments or direct labour organizations (DLOs) (Clarke and Wall, 2004). But overall, women's participation has decreased: in a survey of building occupations in the private sector, the proportion of women building trade operatives in the UK was found to be 0.2 percent, with the highest proportion in painting, at 0.8 percent

(CITB, 2002). In the UK, this decline is generally attributed to the declining importance of the DLOs since the 1980s (Michielsens et al., 1997). A similar situation can be seen in the Netherlands, where female membership has also fallen.

The Italian figure for female union membership in construction is revealing of the gender difference between factory- and site-based work, with tradeswomen more likely to be found working in workshops than on site: in the FILCA-CISL, women represent 1 percent of membership in construction (site), but 30 percent in the wood industry (workshop). In Spain, where the construction industry, in common with the UK, has high levels of self-employment, temporary work and casual labour, including immigrants (all factors militating against women), women's presence on site has been claimed to be 'purely anecdotal' (Byrne and Van de Meer, 2002).

Eastern Europe provides a contrast: women do not play an equal role in the industry, but there is significantly greater integration into the workforce. Though female union membership is not broken down by trades, this is overall much higher than in western European countries, at 20 percent in Serbia, 25 percent in the Czech Republic, and 35 percent in Russia. Women members are found not only in professional occupations (as architects, designers, and managers), but also as machine operators, crane drivers, painters and plasterers. Women's employment in the construction industry and female union membership have decreased in most eastern European countries since the end of the Soviet Union, along with a general decline in construction activity and in employment. Since the change to a market economy, the building industry has also been privatized and union membership is no longer compulsory, giving rise to changes in the gender division of work. The Czech Republic employers' federation (Svaz podnikatelů) reported that women were employed as construction workers (for example, as crane operators) during the communist period, but suggested that this has changed and that they are now working only in administrative and white-collar occupations.

## **Obstacles to Women's Inclusion in Construction**

Both employer and employee organizations show a mixture of enlightenment and prejudice in their assessment of possible obstacles to women working and training in the construction industry. Some respondents saw no obstacles, including the Finnish Electrical Union (Sähköliitto), the Danish Painters' Union, and the Bulgarian and Czech unions (although the latter conceded that the sector did not offer good working conditions). There were no marked differences between the responses of the trade unions and employers, apart from reference by two of the

employers' federations to the self-exclusion of women and their lack of interest in working in the sector. Overall, the employers represented extremes, with at one end, the German Zentralverband des deutschen Baugewerbes (ZDB), which was strongly negative, and at the other, the French Fédération Française du Bâtiment (FFB), which was very positive that 'women in construction is possible'. Other respondents recognize barriers to the integration of women, highlighting the male domination of the industry in terms of its image, culture, and practices and the slow pace of change.

Respondents identified a number of factors seen to constitute this 'male world' and possible obstacles to women's greater integration, as follows.

1. About half mentioned *the physical workload*. The ZDB, representing craft employers, stated that although it supported women having the opportunity to work in manual occupations in construction, their scarcity suggested that they could not cope with the physical demands of the job. This essentially static view of the industry was countered by the Spanish union, ELA, which pointed out that although 'many people think the work is too heavy for women', the increasing use of machinery (and women taking up professional careers) should mean increasing numbers of women in the sector. The Swedish employers' federation also acknowledged that 'we have to find new methods' to tackle the issue of 'heavy loads', while Dansk El-Forbund suggested that women's participation involved a division of tasks.
2. *Unfavourable working conditions*. Such as the generally poor conditions on site, no washing and changing facilities for women and the high level of accidents, were mentioned as obstacles by a number of unions, including FNV-Bouw and the British general union the TGWU, and employers' organizations such as the Associação de Empresas de Construção e Obras Publicas in Portugal, the Construction Confederation in the UK, and FFB in France. Nearly all the respondents felt that the industry's working hours present a difficulty and are incompatible with childcare responsibilities.
3. MCA-UGT, the Spanish union, suggested that *employers' reluctance* to hire women was at the root of their lack of participation. According to the German ZDB, employing women would require 'much stricter working and health regulations', thus imposing additional cost and organizational burdens on the employer.
4. *Organization of work*. The Danish Forbundet Trae-Industri-Byg (TIB) suggested that the organization of work, mainly in 'close-knit gangs', acts as a barrier to the entry of any new person or atypical workers. This exclusive tendency of the gang system, closely linked to performance and wages, has been acknowledged by other research in

the area as a barrier to the entry of women and ethnic minorities (Byrne et al., 2005). IG BAU also considered that subcontracting does not favour the integration of women in recruitment.

Recommendations for change by the social partners in our survey emphasized the need for women craft-workers to be more visible and for good practice to be disseminated. The FFB, for example, suggested that 'testimonies of female workers and the entrepreneurs hiring them seem like one of the best ways of communicating that women in construction is a possibility'. The Cypriot employers' federation, OSEOK, specifically mentioned promoting the opportunity for self-employment to women. The need for government support in terms of public services and initiating equality measures was emphasized by the Czech, Spanish and Swiss unions. These reasons given by social partners echo those by firms in research on access to construction employment for women and ethnic minorities in Europe (EC Consortium, 2003).

## **Women's Involvement in the Construction Unions**

One question posed in our survey was how far women participate in their union as delegates or representatives on health and safety, equal opportunity, or women's committees (where these exist) and how far they are supported in this. Our survey shows that the level of women's union involvement generally reflects, with some rare exceptions, their limited membership. Support measures, if available, are mostly related to the provision of training courses (see Table 2). These are provided by several of the western European unions, but none in the East, which with their already broad female participation, do not see a necessity.

The responses reflected the unions' approach and commitment to equal opportunities and the degree of women's activism, even if they are present only in small numbers. Differences in the approach to equal opportunities are highlighted by the examples of the Finnish and Swiss trade unions. The Swiss Gewerkschaft Bau und Industrie (GBI) has women's committees at national and regional levels and regulations concerning the proportional representation of women: all committees have to have at least two women and at least 30 percent of all trade union posts have to be filled by women. In contrast, The Finnish construction union (Rakennusliitto) claimed that 'women's involvement does not differ from men's. There are no special women's committees and gender issues are dealt with by the committee for cultural and gender issues.' In practice, Rakennusliitto is possibly the most active trade union of all those we surveyed in supporting women members and women in construction generally, providing women-only training courses, an



**TABLE 2 Involvement of Women Members in their Construction Union**

| Country         | Name of union  | Women as union representatives?   | Support measures for the involvement of women ?             |
|-----------------|--|---|---|
| Denmark         | SiD (bricklayers/concreters etc.)                        | No  | No  |
|                 | EL-F (electricians)                                      | Yes: TU delegate; H&S and EO committee  | Yes, conferences  |
|                 | Blik og Rør (plumbers)                                   | No  | No  |
|                 | Maler (painters)   | Yes: TU delegate; H&S and EO committee  | No  |
|                 | The Union of Wood, Industrial and Building Workers (TIB) | Yes: on various committees (industrial, youth, education etc.) and as shop stewards: 100 women (1235 men) | In the 1980s, equal rights committee                        |
| Sweden          | Byggnads   | Yes: TU delegate  | Course on collective bargaining (50 women attended)         |
| Finland         | FEWU   | No  | No  |
|                 | Rakennusliitto   | No  | Women-only collective bargaining training; Gender Committee |
| Norway          | Fellesforbundet (TU)                                     | No  |   |
| Germany         | IG-Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt                                    | Yes, but EO committees refer mostly to construction professions; some women delegates at district levels  | Yes, courses for women at federal and district level        |
| The Netherlands | FNV-Bouw   | Yes: TU delegate; EO committee and as policy coordinator/advisor  | Yes   |
| Britain         | Amicus   | No  | No  |
|                 | Transport and General                                    | Yes: TU delegate; H&S and EO committee; shop stewards   | Yes, participation through regional/national structure      |

TABLE 2 Continued

| Country        | Name of union  | Women as union representatives?  | Support measures for the involvement of women ?   |
|----------------|--|--|---|
| Spain          | ELA  | Yes: TU delegate; H&S and EO committee   | Yes: EO training courses for TU representatives   |
|                | MCA-UGT  | No   | Yes: minimum percentage of women to partake of support measures and a quota of female candidates for election |
| Italy          | FILCA-CISL   | Yes: TU delegate   | No  |
| Switzerland    | GBI  | Yes: TU delegate and EO committee  | Quotas: all committees at least 2 women and 30 percent of all posts; women's committees; courses for women    |
| Russia         | Construction and Building Materials Workers' Union   | Yes: 50 percent of TU delegates at the workplace level, 21 percent regional; 23 percent national. Also H&S and EO committees |   |
| Bulgaria       | Federation of Construction Industry and Water Supply (PODKREPA)                            | Yes: as TU delegates, 31 percent of factory union leaders are women. Women part of most H&S committees. No EO committees     |   |
| Czech Republic | Building Workers' Union of the Czech Republic  | Yes: TU delegates, H&S and EO committee  |   |
| Serbia         | Branch Trade Union of Civil Engineering And Construction Materials Industry (NEZAVISINOST) | Yes: TU delegate. 30 percent of union executive committee; also EO committee   | Local network of women's sections in local organizations  |

Notes: TU = trade union delegate; H&S = Health and Safety representatives; EO committee = Equal Opportunities or Women's Committee members.

Source: own survey, 2002.

annual women's conference, and opportunities to network. The apparently understated Scandinavian position is perhaps attributable to the approach to equality measures and legislation in these countries, which falls within the social-democratic model whereby men and women engage as equal individuals in the labour market (Esping-Andersen, 1990). While this is associated with a high level of female labour market participation, it also means that equality policies are firmly based on the principle of equal treatment and special measures for 'disadvantaged' groups have not been common (Michielsens et al., 2000; Peters, 1996).

In the Danish TIB, women's involvement exceeds their membership level: there are very few women (1 percent), but relatively high levels of union representation. Some 100 women are shop stewards (7.5 percent of all shop stewards). Additionally, this union has four female union officials and an official responsible for equality issues. The executive, youth, industrial, education, and vocational training committees all have women representatives. One likely reason for this high representation is that shop stewards are mostly drawn from the more stable employment environment of the workshop, where tradeswomen are concentrated (as joiners and, to a lesser extent, upholsterers), rather than from construction sites with their less stable employment patterns (a difference also mentioned by the Italian FILCA-CISL). Another reason could lie in the history of the former Carpenters and Joiners' Union, which established an equal rights committee and a programme of meetings and activities for women in the 1980s (Fabricius, 1997). When this union amalgamated with TIB, the equal rights committee was merged into the general work of the union. The women's club situated in Copenhagen, however, continues to function on a voluntary basis.

Other unions reported that they are taking steps to increase women's involvement. The Swedish union, Byggnads, has run a two-week course on collective bargaining attended by 50 women and has set up a women's network. The Swiss GBI aims to promote emancipation 'inside and outside' the union, including through courses for women members, regional women's committees, a national women's committee, a women's trade union representatives conference, and a national women's conference held every two years. In Germany, a significant effort has been made to monitor the involvement of women in IG BAU. In general, the higher up the hierarchy, the fewer the women to be found, though participation at local levels is mixed, with, for instance, a relatively high number of female delegates from areas such as Bonn and none from some other localities. There is a rather weak imposition of a quota whereby women are represented in the organization according to their level of membership (14.8 percent). Nevertheless, 2 of the 56 district committees have female chairpersons and there are significant numbers of female works councillors, especially in cleaning (64 percent of the total) and

painting (10 percent) and architectural and engineering offices (35 percent) (IG BAU, 2004). In general, therefore, female representation in the construction unions conforms with membership, with little attempt made to improve this, apart from in the Scandinavian countries.

## **Support Measures to Promote Female Employment and Training**

A proactive approach to gender inclusion is indicated not only by female representation within the unions, but also by specific measures taken to accommodate and encourage women. The social partners were therefore asked if support measures to promote the employment or training of women in construction were part of their agenda. These were specified as including clauses in collective agreements or participation in relevant networks or support programmes (concerning, for instance, career guidance, training, recruitment, employment conditions, working time, childcare and other caring responsibilities and health and safety).

In terms of collective agreements, clauses on maternity leave and maternity pay were most often mentioned and no specific clauses were identified relating to training or working time. The Danish Malerforbundet additionally has policies on working conditions during pregnancy, as does the Czech union. 'Positive action' was only mentioned by one respondent, the Italian FILCA-CISL, in relation to the wood industry, where 30 percent of employees are women. In Spain, MCA-UGT has measures to improve access and career progression for women and a policy of 'horizontal' agreements is being introduced whereby gains made by women in one sector are automatically applied across all sectors.

Overall, as apparent in Table 3, support is offered mostly in terms of participation in networks, though several unions also listed support programmes, for instance, relating to childcare and health and safety or more general conditions of employment. Rakennusliitto in Finland is also involved in a special campaign in comprehensive schools to introduce construction occupations to girls, including visits to vocational schools. This was also the only union to refer to gender pay differentials as an important area of union concern. Women painters' pay is approximately 80 percent of men's, and such a gender pay differential applies to construction occupations generally in Finland and indeed throughout western Europe.

While union support policies and programmes are not common, participation in networks or conferences on women in construction or related subjects is rather more widespread, although specific women's networks are still scarce. In Britain, the TGWU has a link with the

**TABLE 3 Unions: Collective Agreements and Support Measures to Promote the Employment or Training of Women in Construction**

| Country | Name of union   | Policies/collective agreement clauses in relation to women in construction    | Programmes/support with impact on women in construction   | Networks and participation in conferences  |
|---------|---|---|---|--|
| Denmark | SiD   | No  | No  | Involvement in family and equality issues committees<br>A network is in the process of being established   |
|         | EL-F  | No  | No  |  |
|         | Blik og Rør   | No  | Policies on pregnancy and working conditions during pregnancy   | Not the federation itself, but local departments (i.e. Copenhagen) have established a women's network  |
|         | Maler<br>The Union of Wood, Industrial and Building Workers (TIB) | Yes<br>Yes  |   |  |
| Sweden  | Byggnads  | No  | Relating to career guidance; recruitment related (EQUAL Libra Project)  | Women's network established  |
| Finland | FEWU<br>Rakennusliitto  | No special clauses. Plumbers have maternity pay of 56 days in their agreement | No<br>Yes: relating to conditions of employment; childcare; H&S; school campaigns to show construction occupations to girls | No<br>Network of women painters; meetings of women in the sector; the Femina Baltica network; annual women's conference; Nordic countries equality seminar |

TABLE 3 Continued

| Country         | Name of union                | Policies/collective agreement clauses in relation to women in construction   | Programmes/support with impact on women in construction  | Networks and participation in conferences                             |
|-----------------|------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Norway          | Fellesforbundet (TU)         | Yes, aimed at employment not education   |  |   |
| Germany         | IG-Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt        | No   | No   | Yes, via IFBWW  |
| The Netherlands | FNV-Bouw                     | Yes: Women and Employment Secretary, women's groups, women-only training   | Yes: conditions of employment; working time; childcare   | No  |
| Britain         | Amicus Transport and General | No<br>(Yes: removed references to male gender for specific rates of pay)   | No<br>Yes: relating to career guidance, training, recruitment: CITB promotional weekend to encourage women into the industry | No<br>Links with groups promoting women in the industry, such as WAMT |
| Spain           | ELA<br>MCA-UGT               | No – only the maternity clause<br>Yes: measures to improve access and career progression for women; introducing horizontal rights* | Yes: childcare, H&S<br>Yes: childcare, H&S   | No<br>Yes   |
| Italy           | FILCA-CISL                   | Yes: positive action agreements particularly in the wood industry  | Yes: relating to training, conditions of employment, working time, childcare, H&S  | No  |

TABLE 3 Continued

| Country        | Name of union   | Policies/collective agreement clauses in relation to women in construction   | Programmes/support with impact on women in construction                                       | Networks and participation in conferences  |
|----------------|---|--|---|--|
| Switzerland    | GBI   | No   | EO project 'Women in Building'; Workshop to build women networks in industry                  | Women's commission of the SGB (Swiss Trade Union Congress); other conferences on flexible work and gender issues |
| Russia         | Construction and Building materials Workers' Union  | No: everything is fixed by the Labour Code   | No, women are well presented  | No   |
| Bulgaria       | Federation of Construction Industry and Water Supply (PODKREPA)                             | No   | No  | No   |
| Czech Republic | Building Workers' Union of the Czech Republic   | The sectoral-level agreement details the working operations and places forbidden for women, pregnant/nursing mothers. Detailed clauses at enterprise level in relation to women working. | TU is represented on the EO committee of the Czech Moravian Trade Union Confederation (CMKOS) | Union is represented on the EO Committee of the Czech Moravian Trade Union Confederation (CMKOS)                 |
| Serbia         | Branch Trade Union of civil engineering and construction materials industry. (NEZAVISINOST) | No   | Career guidance; training and childcare arrangements; women's network                         | International branch women's network   |

Note: TU = trade union delegate; H&S = Health and Safety representatives; EO committee = Equal Opportunities or Women's Committee members.

\* If women gain a right in one sector, this automatically applies across sectors.

Source: own survey, 2002.



campaign group Women and Manual Trades. Rakennusliitto again provides a prime example of 'good practice' in its support for female painters through networks and conferences. It organizes an annual national women's conference, focusing on collective agreement policies (such as health and safety in 2002), social policies and broader societal questions. Involvement in the Femina Baltica network (a cooperation of Baltic women's organizations and the trade union movement in the Baltic countries) has led to participation in seminars in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia on subjects such as violence towards women in their working life. The union acknowledges that such meetings have been very important for their women members as 'in the individual workplaces there are very few women employed'.

Almost no employer federation has staff members or units dealing with women's or equal opportunities issues or participates in women's networks or conferences. The Construction Confederation in the UK indicated activities relating to career guidance, training, recruitment, employment conditions, childcare arrangements, and health and safety. The Norwegian Byggenaeringens Landsforening also participates in the women's network of the peak confederation, the NHO, and, though having no specific programmes to promote women, stated that: 'there is a general wish to have more women in the construction industry. Therefore the larger companies try to recruit women, also in high positions.' The Swedish Bygginidustrier also reported that 'to meet the expected labour shortage our members have decided to widen the target group for recruitment to include both women and immigrants [and this is one of our] most important tasks'.

There are very few policies and programmes to support women's recruitment and retention in construction at the level of individual employers' federations or member firms. The French FFB reported policies specifically relating to women's recruitment and training, part of a nation-wide initiative based on an agreement with six ministries to promote the image of the sector and the training and employment of women. The FFB, uniquely, has also established a network of what are termed 'co-spouses', that is, women working with husbands or other family members in running a construction business. In addition, some of the local FFB offices have set up projects with employment agencies and training centres for recruiting women.

Several projects concerned with training or encouraging women to work in the industry, and retaining those that succeed, have been launched under the EC EQUAL programme aimed at countering gender segregation (EQUAL, 2003). These have often involved collaboration with one or both of the social partners, though this was not in the main reported in the survey responses, possibly because it occurs at regional or local levels. Swedish union (Byggnads) involvement in the EC Libra

project also aims to achieve a more even gender distribution in construction, partly by promoting courses in building techniques to girls at secondary school and university level. In Spain in Asturias, projects involving social partners train women in a variety of construction skills. However, the transition from these schemes into the mainstream of the industry remains a formidable obstacle.

Overall, focused support measures related to the training, recruitment, and retention of women in construction by either the unions or the employers' federations are not at all common, especially for skilled trades. There are some notable exceptions to the rule, such as the Finnish painters' union and the employers in France, Norway, and Sweden. In the UK, the employer-based Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) is also working with employers and other agencies in regionally based 'collaborative partnerships' to increase female and ethnic minority representation in the industry.

## Conclusion

The extent of male domination in skilled building work in western Europe, little changed over the past 20 years, while not unexpected, is nonetheless still striking. The picture of uniformity is surprising in the context of the diversity of labour markets and welfare and industrial systems in Europe. The male domination of construction is one of the most extreme examples of labour market segregation. Eastern Europe, where there is significantly greater integration of women into the workforce, provides a contrast to the picture in the West. The survey data confirm the pattern of extreme segregation, extending to the social partner organizations themselves, with the notable exceptions of the Danish and Finnish female painters and the actions of the Finnish painters' union. Women's inclusion in the construction sector is not a priority issue (or even on the agenda) for the majority of the social partners. The responses reflect, on the one hand, the 'conservatism' of an industry where it still remains acceptable to suggest that women lack an increasingly less essential requirement to do the job — physical strength. On the other hand, the responses pander to a 'discourse' of gender equality, but one that does not automatically lead to equal opportunity policies or programmes. Indeed, the theoretical equality of women and men in the labour market was given several times as a reason for inaction.

In general, the social partners appear to have had little impact on the inclusion of women in the sector, showing more commitment in principle than in practice. The suggestions that only by changing production processes and by the increasing use of mechanization will women be allowed more access reflects the reluctance to address the often very

different obstacles to inclusion from a variety of angles and in a proactive way. Changing technology will not of itself bring about a change in the gender division of labour. Even with the removal of structural obstacles to integration, such as inappropriate and poor working and employment conditions and discriminatory recruitment practices, other more intangible obstacles will remain. The industry is still marked by a high level of health and safety risks in all countries, not improved by the persistence of a macho culture and the short-term concern with output at the cost of developing the potential of the workforce. This macho character, with its own language, jokes, and working attitudes, continues to act as an important deterrent to entry by women. The social partners have the platform to start to make inroads and to change the industry from within, but still need to be encouraged to put women in construction on their agenda.

## NOTE

- 1 The full results of this survey on which this article is based are found in, L. Clarke et al. (2004) 'The Social Partners for Construction: Force for Exclusion or Inclusion?' in L. Clark et al. (eds) *Women in Construction*, Construction Labour Research Studies 2. Brussels: CLR and Reed International.

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